

# Keith Clarke

Born 1930.

Autobiographical life story.

Available online at [www.livesretold.co.uk](http://www.livesretold.co.uk)

## Contents

1. Introduction
2. My Parents
3. Memories of Harvey's
4. The Engineers Drawing Office
5. Moving On
6. Others' Memories

*This life story is archived, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Greenwich Industrial History website. The website describes in breadth and depth the remarkable industrial history of Greenwich.*

# 1. Introduction



The G.A. Harvey Greenwich factory in its prime.

*The following article by Keith Clarke is about his family's background at Harvey's and his experiences there. Harvey's was a metal fabrication factory on the Woolwich - the East Greenwich Fire Station is in front of what would have been the site and Holmwood Villas led to the entrance. The firm had a sports ground in Hervey Road and a housing for their workers – the most obvious being Harvey Gardens in Floyd Road, and Prentice Court nearby.*

I worked at Harvey's for six years in the early 1950's, but the story starts back at the beginning of the century. The Clarke family lived in Lewisham in the same area as George Harvey, and at some unknown date, my paternal grandfather Arthur Clarke joined the company, in its earliest years. By 1924 he was Works Manager, and later a Director, as was his brother Edwin.

---

## 2. My Parents

My father was Arthur Clarke's eldest child and only his son – and was also christened Arthur, but always called Bob. The remaining six children were all girls. One would expect the only son to have been fussed over and spoilt by his sisters, but this was far from the case. Before going off to school my father he had to clean the shoes for all the girls and not leave until his grandfather approved. Grandfather doted on the girls and appeared to dislike his only son.

Dad went to school in Brockley and then London University until he joined the Army in the First World War as a lieutenant in the South Staffs.

After the war he joined what was thought of as the family firm - Harvey's. Grandfather said "expect no help from me". Dad got none, and starting as a draughtsman, worked his way to becoming, eventually, Manager of the Perforation Department. He also seems to be remembered for his sporting and social activities - in the years up to the Second World War he was, at various times, Captain of the football team, Secretary of the tennis club, and pianist in the Harvey Dance Band.

Grandfather and the rest of the Clarke family were wealthy, middle class, and living in a large Victorian house adjoining Blackheath. Dad meantime was courting a pretty young girl from the typing pool, and they married in 1925. This did not meet with Grandfather's approval, to marry into a lower class, and this rubbed off on the daughters who were never very nice to my Mother.

Grandfather died in 1931, but left all his considerable wealth to his daughters by way of a trust fund. A small amount in the trust was to go to the son at a date determined by the trustees. Eventually my Mother needed a life saving operation just months before the National Health started and the cost was far beyond their ability to pay. Dad approached the trustees, and they released the money, but a smaller amount than was needed since "the due date had not been reached". I wonder if Grandfather was laughing.

---

### 3. Memories of Harvey's

My own memories of Harvey's start in the 1930s with the Christmas parties for employee's children. These were held in the Victor Institute on a Saturday afternoon and all the children were given a present. The Victor Institute was an old building just outside the works - to the left of the imposing main entrance. It belonged to the Company and was always in use for social events, dances, amateur dramatics, snooker etc. The main entrance to the offices was for use of senior staff only, which I found to my cost later.

More strenuous activities took place at the Harvey Sports Ground, in Hervey Road. At the start of the war in 1939, my father was considered too useful at Harvey's to be called up, but after Dunkirk he started Harvey's own Local Defence Volunteers, later to become The Home Guard.

I was evacuated at the start of the war, but returned to home in Wricklemarsh Road, just in time for the blitz. There were no schools open in London, so Dad sometimes took me to his office and I was given some minor tasks to occupy the time. Later, emergency schools started and I had to go back to being a schoolboy.

My next Harvey contact was sheltering in the basement of the transport bay, together with many other Harvey families, every night for many months during the V1 and V2 attacks.

I left school in 1945 and was drafted into an electrical company in New Cross, on war work for the Navy, and had taken an engineering apprenticeship.

From 1946 onwards sport was my father's passion. Cricket was now paramount - he was captain of the 1st team on Saturdays and Sundays and I was proud to be 1st team scorer.

Eventually Dad was requested to go Sydney Harvey's office and asked: "In which department is your son working"? "He is not yet with the company sir". "Well make sure he joins soon, we should have the third generation of Clarkes here". I felt rather pleased with this and Dad said he would keep his ears open for a possible opening. That was in 1949 and I joined in 1950. My Dad was by then the senior manager, and Chairman of the Sports Club.



## 4. The Engineers Drawing Office

The Engineers Drawing Office was in the Victor Institute, in what had been the snooker hall. It was a very happy place, and being away from the main offices, was not so formal. This was still the time of surnames, pin striped trousers, black coats, or suits and so we were 'rebels' in grey flannels and fair isle jumpers. If we had to go to the main building we had to borrow a coat or the security officer would not even let you into the corridors. It was during this time that I went into the main office via the senior staff entrance - or nearly did - I was grabbed by the collar and frog marched out to the street, lectured at great length about my insignificance in the world, and should there be a next time - the sack.



A punching machine for coal sorting.

I married in August 1951, and we lived with my parents in Wricklemarsh Road. Helen joined the company shortly after, working for Mr. Hughes, the personnel manager, initially filing, and later, when Myrtle Holt left, she interviewed prospective female employees. John Roberts looked after the male side. Our marriage got a photo and write up in the house magazine.

Another family connection with Harvey's Dad's sister, Mildred. She was Sydney Harvey's Private Secretary and a very formidable Lady - she frightened me and terrified my wife. Because of the family rift, we had never got to know her as an Aunt, and fortunately did not move in her elevated circles at work.

Harvey's owned many properties around Greenwich & Woolwich, which were rented to employees. The main estate was Harvey Gardens, alongside the 'valley' in Charlton. An application for housing had to be made to the Estates Manager. We

had to wait some time, but in October 1953 were offered a 3rd floor flat in Harvey House, Nightingale Place, Woolwich Common. We loved it. The front rooms looked across the common to the Royal Artillery Barracks, and beyond to the Thames and Docks. Then in 1956 we applied for a ground floor flat, since the stairs had become a problem with a baby. The new address was The Anchorage, Vanbrugh Hill, Greenwich, so the stairs were replaced by the struggle to push a pram up Vanbrugh Hill. We were on the ground floor; the middle was empty I think, and Mr. & Mrs. Brighty loved on the top floor with their children Kay & Geoffrey. Mr. Brighty worked in the wages office and Helen already knew him from work. Helen and Mrs. Brighty became friends. Geoffrey is now a Conservative Councillor on the London Borough of Greenwich.



A fractionating tower under construction.

In the far south east corner of the Harvey works, hidden away, was a small subsidiary company which made high quality oak shelving for libraries. This was Libraco, run by Mr. Mandry. His pleasant and clever son Bill took over our Drawing Office and instigated a planned maintenance scheme for all the plant, a lot of work, looking at every machine and deciding how and when it should be maintained. Each draughtsman was allocated a number of machines to study and become familiar with. In the event of a breakdown or repair, we would then assist the maintenance staff by drawing up any parts wanted and arranging manufacture. It all seemed to work well.

---

## 5. Moving On

At a later date and out of the blue, our cosy office was moved to the top floor of one of the two 'new buildings'. Concrete floor, concrete ceiling, and the smell of paint drifting up from the Steel Equipment spray shop below. Not ideal for a drawing office, and one or two of my friends left. The happy days had gone. I started to scan the job adverts and went to a few interviews. At that time it was quite usual for young draughtsmen to move around to gain experience.

Sydney Harvey had died, and his son Gordon took over as Chairman. He started bringing in young "whizz kids" who were going to make this old fashioned firm into a modern commercial success. My Father, by then acknowledged as the leading expert in metal perforating in the UK, was to be 'advised' by a 30 year old, "still wet behind the ears". Other senior staffs were similarly treated. My Parents, we visited my parents, who by now lived at Orpington, and Dad, visibly upset, told us of the changes occurring at Harveys. "It was going downhill fast, it may last 20 years, it could be gone in 5, and my prime concern is to get you out of the Harvey tied house". This was all a great shock. Although I'd only worked there a short time, our whole family life had revolved around Harvey's. It was suggested that we move into their Bungalow for as long as it took to buy our own place.

Friday 22nd Feb 1957 was my last day at Harvey's. I like to think that Sydney Harvey would have been sad. I wonder if he ever found out which department I worked in. Two weeks later we moved from our nice, but tied flat.

Dad soldered on until retirement in 1962, in increasing bitterness and dismay at what was happening to our family firm. Aunt Mildred had long gone, so Dad had the sad honour of being the last of the Harvey Clarkes.

My connections and interest with Harvey's stopped in 1962, and only now, in old age, do I wonder how it all ended, and would my life have taken a different path if Sydney Harvey's son had been different.

---

## 6. Others' Memories

A notable feature of the Greenwich Industrial History website, from which this life story is drawn, is that readers can enrich the story by adding their own memories. The contributions that follow were added to Keith Clarke's account.

### Linda Packard

My name is Linda Packard (nee Shortland) and my mother Kath Shortland (nee Johns) has a long association with Harveys and the sports ground where her father was the groundsman. My father John Shortland would have played cricket with your father and you may remember him because he was awarded a bat for scoring 1,000 runs in a season.

### Andrew Peat

My name is Andrew Peat, my father was an engineer in the spinning shop at Harvey's for a number of years from 60's to early 70's. We had a number of relations working there too (Lorman) who lived in Harvey Gardens. We lived in Troughton Road so it was very easy for my father to get to and from work after his shift. My brother and I attended the Christmas parties at Harvey's I remember all the children sitting in the big hall on the floor watching the cartoons and then going through to long tables and having a wonderful meal. Soon after there would be some entertainment such as a magic show followed by all the children lining up for a gift which were always really high quality items such as Tonka toys etc. I still have a number of newspaper clippings showing my dad at work, one of his claims to fame was some work he did making end sections for submarines.

### Peter Finch

My Father, Bob Finch, worked at Harvey's from the end of the fifties to the early sixties. We lived in a tied house: 20b Morden Road, Blackheath. I have very fond memories of living there and taking part in various activities arranged by the company. My Father died in 1971 at the young age of 49. I also have fond memories of a man called Sid Ray, a friend of my father who went out of his way to organise days out, the gift of an upright piano together with his efforts to deliver it, climbing many stairs. When my father died, even though we hadn't seen him for many years, he found out about the funeral and made sure he attended. What a gentleman. I would love to know what happened to him.

### Gary Chick

Hi, My name is Gary Chick. I was employed straight out of school in 1973 by Libraco as a draughtsman/estimator, at the time I was living between Eltham and Hither Green.

The Works Manager then was "Norman Spice" he travelled in from Sittingbourne, the setter out was "Ted Woods" who lived locally, there was a manager there by the name of "Sid Emblin" who had been there some considerable time, I believe, and my training was handed over to the estimator "Phil Childs" who lived locally.



I only worked there for slightly more than 5 years, basically just up to the end of my training. I was originally offered a position in the Harvey workshop as an apprentice, but I turned this down as I did not like the smell and grease, or if I'm honest the blue overalls, so they offered me the position in Libraco, I started on £14.00 per week.

The furniture that Libraco manufactured was, I believe, at the top end of the market in proper wood, Teak, Rosewood etc.

I clearly remember the massive factories and machinery, the APW factory was situated at the rear of the Libraco factory and used to manufacture some massive metalwork, but most of all, I remember when it all closed and Libraco was left there almost all on its own. They relocated the Libraco offices and factory into one of the buildings next to the main entrance a couple of floors up, it was really eerily strange walking through the empty factories which used to be full of people, machines, noise and smells.

I remember the thumps from when they were sinking the piles into the river for the building of the Thames barrier.

I believe that Libraco moved to premises closer to Woolwich before finally closing the doors a number of years ago.

I sometimes revisit the area and the last time I did, probably a couple of years ago now, the facade of the Harveys main entrance, where I walked through the doors aged 16, was still standing, but all around was new retail units.

I will close by saying that I owe a lot to Harveys and Libraco, but the lions share to those people that I mentioned earlier, together they set me up for my future life and employment, to which I am extremely grateful.

## Matt Harrap

My name is Matthew Harrap and I joined Harveys as a Technician apprentice in 1968 when I was sixteen. I remember being very excited from the start as the company was very large and a hive of activity with such a tremendous history.

I spent my first year in the 3rd floor training school along with around 50 other apprentices learning the basic engineering disciplines such as fitting, turning, welding, sheet metalwork, electrician, etc and remember doing the first aid course with a guy called Pat Doran. I remember my fellow apprentices Roger Roud and Doug Pennell and all the mischief we used to get up to !!!

I then spent the next 4 years on a tour of the various departments such as Maintenance, Sheet metal (light cons), heavy cons, APW toolroom, APW drawing office, office furniture production control and office furniture Drawing office, heavy cons drawing office and many more - it was a wonderful learning experience and I met many great characters.

When I finished my apprenticeship I was offered a job with Harvey Fabrication as a Contracts Engineer looking after some of our main customers Shelvoke and Drury,

E C Hallum and Poole Contracts this I did for 2 years before leaving and taking up a position with Molins of Deptford.

## Joyce Snipp

I worked at Harveys, 1945-49, in steel equipment & later in the Packers. I was directed to do essential work. I started off by helping with Rocket Cones & then depth charges. The packers was much cleaner & I enjoyed my time packing & wrapping, filing cabinets & cupboards, also making wooden crates for other products. I met my late husband Alf Snipp who worked in the Cutters. He also Boxed for Harveys boxing club & won all of his fights (14). Our wedding photo also appeared in the Harco Magazine in May 1955. We had a good social life thanks to the Dinners & Social occasions at the Victor Institute.

Alf left Harveys in 1960. To join BT (a bit more money was needed for the expected new baby). When Gordon Harvey was married, every employee in the Factory received a gift. The ladies had a choice between a powder compact or a fountain pen. I chose a compact. I still live in Charlton, so much has changed over the years, not always for the better. Happy Days. Now a message to Linda Packard, I knew your Mum Kath, I used to go to the Local Trefoil meetings, I joined with Lily Coombes, Lily's husband Stan also worked at Harvey's. They were our neighbours in Victoria Way. In fact nearly everyone who lived around either worked at Harvey's or Johnson & Phillips.

## Tom Rogers

Hi, my name is Tom Rogers and I remember being invited by one of my school friends to attend the Harvey's Christmas party in 1959, My friend's father, Nelligan, worked for Harvey's It was a really great party, I recall, and I still remember the wonderful flashlight I received as a present. Later, when I was 16, in 1966, I got a summer job at Harvey's and worked in the wire weaving department. I recall that the wire weaving operation was a pretty substantial part of the company.

## Ron Purton

A contributor writes about Ron Purton: He was a boilermaker plater who worked in the cons shop until they made him a foreman. I worked with him on and of during my apprenticeship as a plater apprentice. His mate was a Scottish guy called Jock Forest and the two of them were very good friends. Ron's father also worked there as manager of the heavy tank department. I joined in 1955 as an apprentice then after finishing I went into the fuse weld department as a rate fixer. This was the largest department, consisting of three huge bays with, in each, two 40 ton cranes. They made everything from 1/2 inch to 3inch thick steel from wind tunnels for Rolls-Royce to vessels for the oil companies. The largest of these I believe was 19ft 4 inches in diameter and 112 fr long. It was so large that they had to seal it airtight put it on a low loader take it down to the Thames then float it to the ship that then took it to Venezuela.